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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000322

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/28/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [KBTS](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SERIOUS HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS IN GALI

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires A.I. Kent Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. During the first official USG trip to Abkhazia since the August 2008 war, representatives of civil society in Gali provided information about several serious human rights concerns facing ethnic Georgians in Gali. They face extortion from well-organized criminal gangs; pressure to accept Abkhaz or Russians passports, or some level of pressure to renounce Georgian citizenship in order to have access to basic social benefits and civil rights; and limitations on both freedom of movement and Georgian language education. Some expressed great fear at the potential security and economic impact of a closure of UNOMIG and were considering leaving if it did close. The IDP issue remains contentious, with ethnic Abkhaz admitting only grudgingly that ethnic Georgians should someday be given a chance to return to Gali, but not the rest of Abkhazia. End summary.

#### TROUBLES IN GALI

12. (C) EUR/CARC Advisor on the South Caucasus Conflicts Michael Carpenter and EmbOff traveled to Abkhazia February 12-13 and met de facto officials, UN staff, and representatives of civil society in both Sukhumi and Gali. Two representatives of the Human Rights Centre in Gali made the most serious allegations of human rights concerns, indicating that the local population faced grave persecution.

Most troubling was the allegation that criminal gangs control the district, running an almost feudal system of extorting a certain percentage of villagers' crops. They said the district is divided into four areas, with each area divided into small clusters of three or so villages that are controlled by a particular gang. The gangs are composed of former militia members who fought in the past and who would likely be called upon again to fight if necessary in the future. They are somehow incorporated into official structures, such as the de facto interior or defense ministries, but local de facto authorities cannot control them, and ethnic Abkhaz residents themselves fear them. In some cases, individual villagers have even been forced to work for the gangs essentially as slaves, harvesting produce on abandoned land or working on construction projects in Sukhumi without pay. One of the gangs is reportedly affiliated with the Krtadze clan in the area around Chuburkhinji. According to these human rights workers, this gang, after seeing the Danish Refugee Council's renovation of a kindergarten, even tried to force the Council to renovate one of the gang's buildings. The workers asked that this example be kept in confidence, lest the Council's staff suffer retaliation.

13. (C) The Human Rights Center representatives noted other human rights concerns as well, such as restrictions on freedom of movement across the administrative boundary line

between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. They confirmed Kishmaria's statements that the boundary is being strengthened, and the cost of crossing the boundary is quite high for the local population, ranging from 300 to 1,000 rubles (approximately \$9-\$30). They also noted what they called the growing Russification of the region. The representatives said that all schools in Gali should officially conduct classes in Russian; although the schools in lower Gali conduct classes in Georgian, it is in fact illegal to do so (the UN human rights officer in Gali said that he does not believe that teaching in Georgian is technically illegal). Beyond the legal question, however, the representatives said the de facto authorities are making it more difficult to maintain the Georgian-language system in practice by refusing to pay the salaries of Georgian-language teachers. In the past, the Georgian government supported these teachers, but now that the boundary is more closed, that support cannot get through. According to the Human Rights Center representatives, parents themselves must therefore support the Georgian-language teachers, but that is becoming more difficult for the same reason.

#### PASSPORTIZATION

¶4. (C) Carpenter asked Kishmaria about reports of passportization in Gali (i.e., compelling ethnic Georgians to accept Abkhaz so-called passports and renounce Georgian passports and/or citizenship). Kishmaria said that the process of making the document available had begun, with 7,000 applications already lodged, but only a small number issued (a UN political officer estimated the number issued at 200). Kishmaria said the process would speed up and possibly

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finish by the end of the year, but no one would be forced to accept an Abkhaz so-called passport, with a prospective permanent resident card eventually being offered instead. The latter would not bestow all the rights of a so-called citizen, however, such as voting rights, but Kishmaria said individuals would have access to basic services, such as the issuance of a driver's license. He insisted that no one's civil rights would be violated because of his or her identification document, and that no one would have to renounce Georgian citizenship. Some NGO representatives in Gali, however, said that, in fact, applicants had to write out by hand a renunciation on a blank line at the bottom of the form. Thus there would be no evidence of the requirement on the form itself, but it would not be processed without the statement. The UN political officer in Sukhumi said that no one was being forced to give up his or her Georgian passport to receive an Abkhaz document, and the interlocutors in Gali agreed. (Note: Were it implemented, such a step would greatly inhibit the local population's freedom of movement into the rest of Georgia. End note.) He also noted, however, that those with Abkhaz so-called passports would be eligible to receive a Russian pension, which is not generous, but nevertheless significant.

¶5. (C) Regarding passportization, Shamba said that no one would be compelled to accept an Abkhaz so-called passport, because in fact the de facto authorities had no great incentive to empower the population of Gali politically. He even stated the authorities did not want the Gali residents to vote in large numbers, although he backed off a bit when asked why the de facto authorities would not want residents of Abkhazia to participate in the political process.

#### OPTIONS ARE DWINDLING -- AND PEOPLE MAY BEING LEAVING

¶6. (C) An older couple on the street in the city of Gali indicated they were seriously considering leaving their lifelong home to live with their daughter in Tbilisi. They were concerned with both the economy and the security of the region, and for them, the deciding factor would be whether the UN mission remains. If it goes, the wife will lose her

job, which is their primary means of support; also, they will not feel safe. The husband said that "they" (understood to mean the Abkhaz) will be able to do whatever they want if the UN leaves, making a slashing motion across his neck. He said that many of their neighbors are also thinking about leaving.

He confirmed the story about the unofficial requirement to write out a renunciation of Georgian citizenship on the application for an Abkhaz so-called passport.

IDPs -- PERHAPS A RETURN TO GALI, BUT NOT BEYOND

17. (C) All the ethnic Abkhaz interlocutors showed discomfort when asked about the return of ethnic Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) to Abkhazia. No one rejected the idea outright, but no one embraced a comprehensive or swift process either. Shamba agreed that Georgians should eventually be allowed to return to Gali, but said returns to the rest of Abkhazia would be difficult, because old passions could result in renewed violence. The ethnic Abkhaz civil society representatives expressed the same concern. One representative of the Center for Humanitarian Programs in Sukhumi, which was originally founded to help victims of the QSukhumi, which was originally founded to help victims of the war in the early 1990s, went farther than the de facto officials by suggesting that no one should be allowed to return until Abkhazia is recognized as independent. She thought perhaps the right to return could be one element of a negotiated final settlement -- a bargaining chip for recognition. Only Khashig Inal, editor of the independent newspaper Chegemaskaia Pravda, recognized that the IDPs gave Georgia the moral high ground to any extent, calling the issue Georgia's only "trump card," but even he saw problems with any returns outside Gali.

18. (C) When asked about a possible process for returning the IDPs, Shamba protested that there had been a plan, but that the Georgian government had not upheld its part -- i.e., had not allowed a census of the IDPs to proceed. He alleged that the number of IDPs was greatly exaggerated, and therefore the Georgian government did not want to produce an accurate estimate. The CHP representative also suggested that the numbers were inflated because the Georgian government still counted those who had already returned as IDPs. Inal, who adopted the most objective attitude toward the IDP issue, estimated there to be 180,000 IDPs remaining. (Note: The Georgian government estimates there to be around 230,000. End note.)

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